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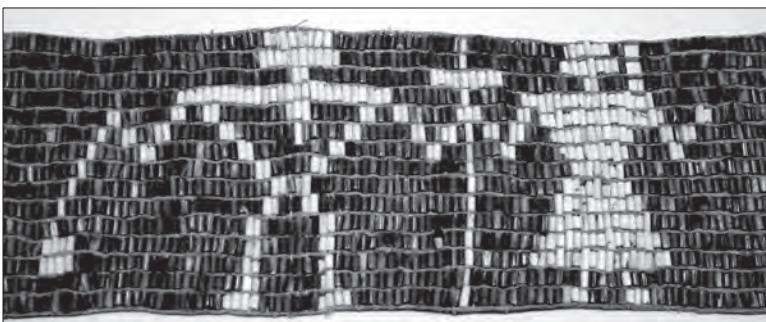
## The Vatican 1831 Wampum Belt: Letters Revealing its Origins Among the Algonquin and Nipissing Groups at the Lake of the Two Mountains

### Introduction

Wampum beads, in the form of individual units, strings, or woven bands, returned to the anthropological gaze in the 1970s (see Ceci 1977; Becker 1980). The actual origins of most of the 300 or more surviving examples of bands in the Americas, usually called *colliers* in French and belts in English, remain completely unknown. The term “bands” includes all variation of straps of wampum, including those used as ornaments, while “belts” generally refer to those made specifically for presentation. In contrast to most belts now known in North America, the specific sources of several that were sent to Europe as gifts or special collectors’ items are better known. One

unusually well documented example, the 1831 Vatican belt, is the subject of this study (Fig. 1a & b). Here I build on my earlier research (see Becker 2001, 2006, 2009) and present evidence that more precisely identifies the people who were involved in its production. The actual origins of such belts have become of increasing importance as various First Nations make claims to specific examples as representing past agreements with governments, often inferring the provision of rights.

Wampum, the marine shell beads of a standardized size and shape originally made by Indigenous communities, first appears in the archaeological record in the 1590s when their

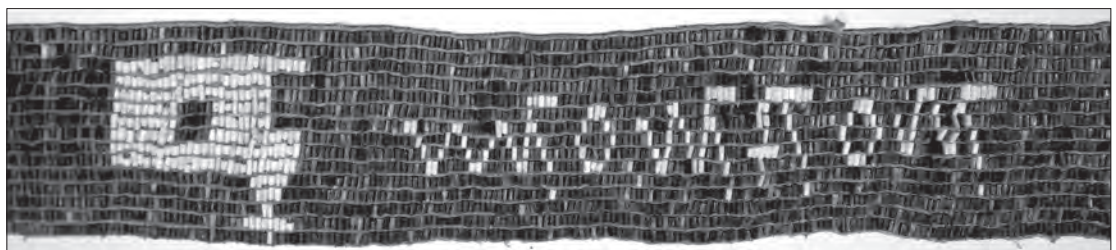


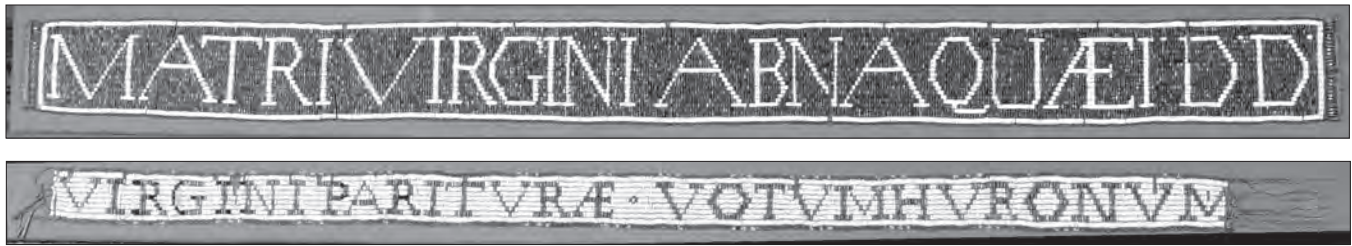
**Fig. 1a**

Central panel of the Vatican 1831 wampum belt, depicting an Indigenous person and a priest (in a “black robe”) clasp[ing] a Christian cross between them. Photograph by Bartosz Hlebowicz, used with permission.

**Fig. 1b**

The inverted word “WHOMPOM” woven into the Vatican 1831 belt, on the half of the belt with Catholic symbols including the church, seen here at the end of the band. Photograph by Bartosz Hlebowicz, used with permission.





**Fig. 2a** (top)

A 21-row belt 2.18 m long, MATRIVIRGINI ABNAQVÆID.D. One of two wampum belts at Chartres Cathedral. Image courtesy of Jonathan Lainey.

**Fig. 2b** (above)

A 9-row belt that is 1.45 m long, with a border of quills dyed red, VIRGINI PARITVRÆ . VOTVMHVRONVM. Second of two wampum belts at Chartres Cathedral. Image courtesy of Jonathan Lainey.

production and use in exchange is believed to have begun. Wampum beads were originally fashioned by tribes near the shores of Long Island Sound where the appropriate shells were abundant. By the early 1600s their use had expanded from being an Indigenous-made commodity used for ornamentation and personal gifts (wampum bands), to include a variety of diplomatic functions in the form of strings and “belts” of wampum (see Lainey 2004). By 1620 wampum was being used to weave ornamental bands, often with simple geometric designs. One category of diplomatic wampum bands can be classified as ecclesiastical to reflect their function as religious prestation pieces. That is, bands made by one First Nation for presentation to another First Nation or to a religious order in Europe. The latter commonly have a Christian cross woven into the center of the design. When sent to another First Nation such belts acted as a call to the recipients to keep the Roman Catholic faith. During the later 1600s several examples of such belts, with religious texts woven into the designs, were sent to France. The best known are two examples now held at Chartres Cathedral (**Fig. 2a & b**). The belt under analysis was sent to Rome in 1831, and the design elements reflect Indigenous and European cultures meeting at a central element, a Christian cross.

## Background

The Vatican 1831 wampum band is an example of an ecclesiastical belt (see Sanfaçon manuscripts). Not only is it an excellent example of the ecclesiastical type, but it was the last known belt assembled by Indigenous peoples for a traditional

purpose: diplomatic, religious, or ornamental (see Sanfaçon manuscripts; Jonathan Lainey, personal communication, April 27, 2020). Not until Lewis Henry Morgan commissioned the fabrication of a wampum belt around 1850 is there any record of a band of any type being made. The Vatican 1831 belt was sent from the Sulpician missionaries at the Lake of the Two Mountains (Lac des Deux Montagnes) in Quebec to Pope Gregory XVI as a form of gift or prestation—one that implied an accompanying obligation. How such a gift to Pope Gregory XVI fits this model of making a request suggests that it was sent as a reminder not to forget the Sulpicians and their converts at the Lake. A reciprocal gift, as expected, was sent by the Pontiff to the Sulpician missionaries at the Lake of the Two Mountains (see also Farabee 1922: 51-52).

The Vatican 1831 wampum belt has long been known to have originated at the Sulpician mission at Oka, which then acted as a Roman Catholic religious focus for the three Indigenous groups based at the Lake of the Two Mountains (cf. Bushnell 1906: 250, Pl. XXII). Oka, also identified by the Mohawk name Kanesatake, lies along the north shore of the delta at the mouth of the Ottawa River in Quebec where it flows into the Lake, which in turn flows into the St. Lawrence River. The Wendat (Huron) who previously occupied this region had been forced out by continual Five Nations Iroquois raiding. There is a record of a major battle fought in 1689 between the colony of New France and the Five Nations Iroquois. Subsequent to this conflict, members of three tribal groups, Algonquin, Nipissing, and Mohawk, had established communities in the area of Oka on the Lake. This chronology

may not be perfectly accurate, but by the 1690s the resources of that area were supporting three distinct Indigenous groups during the summer months. Their winters were spent hunting and trapping in the interior, with members of each group utilizing separate territories.

The Sulpician order of the Roman Catholic Church established itself in that area by 1657 and thereafter became a dominant force in the spiritual life of these Indigenous communities. The Algonquin and the Nipissing are known as only peripheral users of wampum in diplomacy (cf. Becker 2012a), but the Mohawk have long been documented as one of the most involved peoples in the use of wampum diplomacy (Becker 2002). This observation led me to infer that the Mohawk band at the Lake was the primary group involved with the creation and transmission of the Vatican 1831 wampum belt. I now know that I was wrong.

Recently, Jonathan Lainey, Curator of Indigenous Cultures at the McCord Museum, identified two letters that reveal the primary role of the Algonquin and the Nipissing communities in the fabrication of this 1831 gift to Pope Gregory XVI (personal communication, 2017). The new pontiff took office on 2 February, 1831 and the Sulpicians at the Lake wished to welcome him in a traditional fashion. In that year these two Indigenous communities at the Lake of the Two Mountains, encouraged by the Sulpician priests, were involved in the gathering of wampum beads and fashioning of the wampum belt. The process used by the Sulpicians may have been the same as that used in 1650 at the Wendat mission at Lorette, where those attending services were encouraged to contribute wampum beads to be used in a belt (Farabee 1922: 51-52). The letters presented here reveal that a local Mohawk community was not involved in this effort. The use of wampum in diplomacy had been declining since about 1790, and by 1830 had completely vanished from diplomatic records, being entirely replaced by written documents. Thus this example represents a revival of an old custom and the last known Indigenous use of wampum belts in any context. The Lake of the Two Mountains belt was sent to Pope Gregory XVI with an explanatory letter that is transcribed below and provided with a translation.

After the belt was received by the pope it was sent to the ethnographic collections in the Museo di Propaganda Fide within the Istituto di Propaganda Fide located on the Piazza Spagna in Rome. The Istituto, which had long been a repository for ethnographic items brought to Rome by Roman Catholic missionaries, is located near the base of the Spanish Steps. It was in that museum that David Bushnell “discovered” this belt about 1905 (Bushnell 1906: 250, Pl. XXII). Although Bushnell provides a drawing of it in a later publication (1920: 81, fig. 11), the belt thereafter disappeared from published records. In 1975, as part of a research program (1971-1977) to document and inventory all surviving wampum belts, I sought to locate the 1831 example in Rome. There I learned that the museum at Propaganda Fide had long been disbanded and the collection relocated, but to where no one could recall. During a study trip to Rome in 1999 to conduct research in the Ethnographic Collection of the Vatican Museums (see Becker 2002a), I located the Vatican 1831 belt by chance, along with a small Penobscot wampum band (see Becker 2004). Subsequently the Vatican 1831 wampum belt was examined and described in detail for publication (Becker 2001, 2006, 2009).

Presumably because of Bushnell’s two publications, by the 1950s the existence of the two-meter long 1831 band with a Christian cross at the center had become known among several First Nations. Mi’kmaq and other First Nations, many with little or no cultural tradition of wampum use (see Becker 2005), asserted that a wampum belt with a text existed somewhere and that it provided various rights granted by the British Crown, including the right to extract timber from Crown lands (see Becker 2006). The Vatican 1831 belt became a generic example of a band with a “text” which might support claims regarding wampum belts and treaty relations, documented or otherwise. The design elements on the 1831 belt include a central cross flanked on one side by Indigenous designs representing artifacts. On the other side of the cross is a robed priest and a series of ecclesiastical symbols such as St. Peter’s keys (see Becker 2001). On the Indigenous side are representations of a bow, arrow, club, and a “text” that no one could read. In 1999 my efforts to find a reader of this text on the belt had failed. Only by chance an Africanist



colleague working at the Vatican saw my photographs of this belt with the “text” viewed upside down. She immediately recognized it as the word “WHOMPOM” (see Becker 2006). Remarkably, a century of scholarly and popular interest had failed to lead anyone to invert the text and see that the word “WHOMPOM” had been woven, upside down, into the simple iconography of the band. The people commissioned to assemble the band may have been instructed to include this word, perhaps written on a piece of paper by those ordering the belt, with underlining dashes to provide proper orientation. Not being familiar with this European convention, the makers wove the text upside down with the underlining dashes becoming what now appear to be accent marks.<sup>1</sup>

After the 1999 “re-discovery” of the Vatican 1831 wampum belt, details of its movements in the 20th century were reconstructed. The evidence reveals that in 1929 an assortment of objects held in the collections of the Museo di Propaganda Fide were used in an exhibit mounted at the Lateran Palace, next to the Lateran Basilica in Rome. The Lateran ecclesiastical councils, or synods of the Catholic Church, had been held at this papal cathedral often since 313 CE. The council held in 1929 resulted in the Lateran Treaty (*Pacta Lateranensia*), establishing the details of the relationship between the Italian state and the Vatican. Subsequent to the 1929 gathering at the Lateran Palace the ethnographic collections of the Museo di Propaganda Fide were relocated to the Vatican Museums, and among them went the 1831 band.

Soon after the re-discovery of this band, while presenting a paper relating to its location and decipherment (see Becker 1999), I learned that this wampum belt had become a politicized, if not mythicized, object among different First Nations. Various Nations had recently placed a great emphasis on the “text” that had been woven into it (see Becker 2006). Despite my detailed explanation of the band, and indication of the apparent presence of the word “WHOMPOM” as the text, differing ideas continue to persist. As recently as 2005, after the 37th Annual Meeting of the Algonquian Conference in Gatineau, QC a Mi’kmaq museum curator with an entirely different interpretation of the history of this band, explained to me why he believed this belt granted his people timbering rights—a claim that recently

had been denied by the courts. He held an illustration of the Vatican 1831 belt “right side up” (with WHOMPOM upside down) and pointed to various strokes of the letters as representing trees in the forest, with other diagonal strokes being their shadows. And there the narration ended. In the complex social life of the belt, it had clearly moved beyond the realm of the ecclesiastical to become an object of intense interest to Indigenous groups seeking to assert sovereignty.

Of considerable importance to this study were the extensive and meticulous research records conducted by Giovanni Pizzorusso, a specialist on the records of North American Indigenous peoples who had visited Rome since the 1600s. His publication focusing on their visits made between 1826 and 1841 narrates his discovery of an article from the Roman newspaper *Diario di Roma*, dated 11 February, 1832 (Pizzorusso 1993: 402-403). The article indicates that a belt of wampum (the Vatican 1831 belt) had arrived along with a pair of moccasins as part of a gift to Pope Gregory XVI. These items then disappeared into the collection held at the Museo di Propaganda Fide, where Bushnell located the belt some 70 years later. The transfer of the collections from Propaganda Fide was so poorly documented that by 1885 Giuseppe Angelo Colini, one of the first modern scholars to be interested in ethnographic collections, searched for these specific items but had no idea of the history and origins of this belt (see Colini 1885). He also was uncertain of the association between any moccasins and the band. Pizzorusso (2000: 247) quotes Colini’s reference to these “*moccassins con decorazioni di conterie*” (moccasins with beadwork decoration), but suggests that a much smaller Penobscot wampum belt might be the belt that had been sent in 1831. An identification of the cultural origins or traditions associated with these moccasins might help to resolve this question, but these moccasins have never been identified in the Vatican collections, and the small Penobscot band (see Becker 2004) is certainly not an ecclesiastical prestation piece.

The letter that accompanied the Vatican 1831 belt to Pope Gregory XVI is written in French, with a translation to Algonquian added. An Italian translation of the French version is provided by Pizzorusso (2000: 248). Below is offered a transcription of the French version,

together with an English translation. Perhaps the most important aspect of this letter is that it attests to the Algonquin and Nipissing origins of the belt, and not the Mohawk. A separate letter sent by a Mohawk claims that he is part of this gift giving. The writer may have represented a Mohawk faction, or was someone wishing to be closer to the Sulpicians at the Lake. In this period around 1831 an Algonquin group is believed to have left the area of the Lake, taking with them their own small communal collection of wampum artifacts (see Becker 2016), for which a separate history is known (see also Becker 2020).

10. Lettre des Indiens au Pape Grégoire XVI.

Cette lettre est en date du 21 août 1831. Elle donne l'explication d'un collier diplomatique que les Algonquins et les Nipissings envoient à Sa Sainteté en témoignage de leur attachement inviolable au Saint-siège et à la religion catholique, apostolique et romaine.

MON PÈRE,

Fortement tu es salué par tes enfants, qui forment deux bandes: les Algonquins et les Nipissings.

Voici comment est figurée leur parole:

Ma hache, ma flèche et mon arc, voilà seulement ce que je connaissais, alors qu'en bête ainsi je vis. Je ne connaissais pas le Grand-Esprit, quel est-il celui-là qui s'appelle. Pourtant encore confusément je l'avais dans l'esprit.

Mon père, toi qui principalement remplaces Notre-Seigneur Jésus ici sur la terre, afin que tu prenne soin de tous les priants sur toute l'étendue du globe, c'est toi qui a eu pitié de moi, Notre-Seigneur pour que je le connaisse; c'est toi qui a envoyé la robe-noire, afin qu'il vienne me trouver, en lui disant: vois l'indien, comme moi, enfant je l'estime; pars, va lui enseigner la prière, dans la maison de prière introduise-le; la glorieuse Marie l'estimant comme son enfant en retour comme sa mère pour qu'il honore exhorte-le; donne-lui à manger la nourriture du ciel qui est venue, savoir,

Jésus son corps, ouvre-lui la porte du ciel.

Mon père, vraiment j'ai accompli ce que m'a dit la robe-noire que tu as ainsi commissionné, c'est ce que dit ma parole.

Toi qui es mon principal père spirituel, toujours je t'écouterai, jamais je ne me séparerai de toi. Si par cas, plus tard mes petits fils refusaient de t'écouter, tu n'auras qu'à leur montrer cette mienne parole, aussitôt ils se repentiront de rechef encore pour qu'ils t'obéissent.

Tant que je vivrai, je prierai pour toi, en retour, de grâce, bénis-moi.

Au lac des Deux-Montagnes, depuis qu'est né Jésus, 1831, de la lune des mûres, le 25."

This may be translated into English as follows:

10. Letter from the Indians to Pope Gregory XVI.

This letter is dated August 25, 1831. It provides the explanation of a diplomatic collar/wampum belt that the Algonquin and the Nipissing have sent to His Holiness in witness of their deep devotion to the Holy See and to the catholic, apostolic Church of Rome.

My Father.

You are ardently greeted by your children, who form two tribes: the Algonquin and the Nipissing.

These are their words:

My axe, my bow and arrow, are the only things I knew when I lived as an animal/beast. I did not know the Great Spirit, such as he is called, so confused/ignorant was I.

My father, you who principally represents our Lord Jesus here on earth, in order that all the prayerful in the entire world are cared for, it is you who took pity on me, so that I would know Our Lord; it is you who sent the black robe to come and find me, saying to him: see the indian whom I consider to be my child; go, teach him to pray and introduce him to the house of prayer; because glorious Mary considers him as her son, exhort him to honor her

as his mother in return for her affection for him; give him the heavenly food/nourishment which has come in the form of the body of Jesus to open the gates of heaven.

My father, truly I have complied with what the black robe told me you had instructed him to do. This is what I am telling you. [or "*I give you my word.*"]

You who are my primary spiritual father. I will always listen to you, I will never leave you. If by chance my grand-children refuse to listen to you, you will only have to show them this, my words, and they will immediately repent again and obey you.

As long as I live I will pray for you; in return, out of your pure goodness, bless me.

At the Lake of the Two Mountains, since Jesus's birth, 1831, in the 25th [day] of the blackberry moon.

Pizzorusso (2000: 248-49) also transcribes the text of a letter to the pope from an Iroquois (probably Mohawk) elder resident in the 1830s at the Lake of the Two Mountains. The Mohawk writing this letter claims that he was among the former enemies of the Algonquins, but by 1831 had become one with them. His letter claims that the wampum belt sent by the Algonquin and the Nippissing in 1831 should be considered as also having been sent by these Iroquois then living at the Lake, of whom he was one. The response of the pope is written in Algonquin and Latin. Presumably the original version was written in Latin, and an Algonquian speaker, perhaps a priest, translated the Latin into the Indigenous language. Provided below is the Latin version of the letter (taken from Cuoq 1894: 160-61) followed by my translation into English. The problems in the transcription appear to reflect an odd usage of Latin (see also Pizzorusso 2000: 258-59).

[Part] 11. Réponse de Sa Sainteté Grégoire XVI.

Dilecti filli, salute et apostolicam benedictionem.

Litteras quas dedistis plenas suavissimi erga nos studii, adjunctumque torque

as calceos eleganter ex Nationis more acupicios, animo accepimus benevolo, ac lacrymantes præ gaudio Patri totius consolationis qui mœrentibus nobis ob sacre et public rei discrimina id voluit solatii ex ultimis terries afferri.

Læti eas iterato perlegimus, agnoscentes quo pietatis ac religionis sensu Patrem vestrum amantissimum adiistis; viasque Domini considerantes quæ Misericordia ac veritas sunt, perspeximus, qua gestientium animorum exultatione, quibus salutis ac fiduciæ vocibus ereptos vos inclemetis de potestate tenebrarum, translatosque singulari Dei beneficio, in regnum filii dilectionis suæ.

Immenso licet locorum intervallo sejuncti, spiritu ad vos advolvimus, sinuque vos paterno complexi hanc scribimus epistolam quam explicandam committimus lectissimis vestrarum animarum curatoribus, qui nostri erga vos animi interpretes erunt et internuntii.

Pergite, dilecti filii, quos diffusa adoptionis gratia multiplicatos gratulamur, pergite quibus cœpistis itineribus justitiæ ac virtutis instare, æternæ postmodum gloriæ bravium adepturi quam præparavit Deus diligentibus se.

Vocati in admirabile lumen Christi, præventi in benedictionibus dulcedinis, corpore demum as sanguine ipsius Christi Domini ex divini amoris portento saginati, adeste animus, insidiisque protritit communis hostis diaboli quærentis jugiter quos devoret, nullis cupiditatum illecebris, nullis hominum nequam insinuationibus fraudibusque, nullis denique humanis rationibus in jugum vos iterum servitutis abduci sinatis cujus vincula charitas Christi sancta disruptit.

Novimus, filli, flentes dicimus, quæ undique circumstent pericula, novimus quæ ubique impiorum in Religionem sit consensio, et quæ in dies magis convalescat morum clades.

At nolite timere, pusillus grex, quem suo Jesus redemit sanguine. Probe jam edoctos vos cernimus, ubinam auxilium quæren-

dum sit, ubi in maximis quibusque periculis, tuto fidenterque conquiescendum.

Eo itaque, alacres confugite, unde venit omnis spes vitæ, ad Mariam scilicet quæ turris est, ex qua mille pendent clypei, et omnis armature fortium, arma inde as scuta sumite, non quidem hujus sæculi, quæ et ærugo demolitur et hostis confringit, et ignia absumit, sed quæ spiritus sunt, quibus præliari strenue possitis prælia Domini, victoriam quæ vincit mundum, feliciter reportaturi.

Finem hic facimus epistolæ, quin tamen nunquam cessemus humili assiduaque prece eflagitare ab omnium bonorum largitore Deo, ut exorante Virgine Maria quæ Mater, Domina, Dux ac Patrona est salutaris, opis quod in vobis incepit, ipse perficiat, unam semper fidem mentium inter vos custodiens, unamque pietatem actionum.

Mittimus religiosa quædam donaria. Precatorias coronas, cruces, numismata, icunculas, cereasque agni cœlestis imagines, singula gratiis indulgentiarum ditata, nedum ut iis augeantur præsidia, stimulative as pietatis divinque culius studium excitandum fovendumque, sed ut hoc etiam monumento singularem nostrum erga vos voluntatem testatam conspiciatis.

Prospera demum omnia ac Felicia cœlesti præsertim auxilio adprecantes, quo progredientes de virtute in virtutem ascensiones in dies majores disponatis in cordibus vestris. Apostolicam Benedictionem tantæ faustitatis auspicem peramanter vobis, Dilecti filii, vestrisque contribulibus universis impertimur.

Datum Romæ apud S. Petrum die 1a maii millesimi octingentesimi secuni, Pontificatus nostril anno secundo.

Gregorius P.P.XVI. ”

Cuoq (1894: 137) clarifies with a note that “*Je donne ici sous le titre Anote kekon, une sorte d'appendice à cette grammaire*” [*de la langue Algonquin*]. Below is the English translation, an approximation:

Beloved sons [children], good health and apostolic blessings.

The letters [sent to us] are filled with the aroma given to us to study, both the elegant wampum belt of your people as well as the elegant pair of ornamented moccasins that we have received, reveals the thought of a benevolent gift to the Father of all comfort, and the weeping of those who are sad. The joy of the distinctions of the general public seemed to us that He wanted to create comfort, and thus it is of comfort to us on account of this gift from those holy people from the most distant parts of the earth.

With joy, and a second time over them, they knew the sense in which the Father of you all, most loving of the adherents of piety and religion; following guidelines for the mercy of the Lord, which they shall behold the things that are, and the truth, we have looked upon, by which the actors made fun of the ideas of joy, action, and in which they trust the voices of certain salvation by which He has snatched them from the power of darkness and dangers, understand the singular kindness of God, in the earthly kingdom of the Son of his love.

Although separated by distance and an enormous sigh of relief as you approach, you paternally embraced this day to commit to writing a letter explaining how your choice of souls, that our services will be that of interpreters and mediators.

Proceed, O beloved sons, whom he hath distributed you abroad with the grace of adoption, if they be repeated heartily congratulate you, go on the roads of righteousness, and of the power of which you have begun to press on, that I would attain the prize of the glory of the eternal God hath prepared for them that love him afterwards.

Being called into His marvelous light of Christ, proven in the blessings of sweetness, the body, at last, as the blood of the Christ of the Lord from the Divine love, the wonder of the stall, mind, citizens of the mind, for an ambush, having defeated



the common enemy of the devil, who was seeking, year after year to find whom he may devour, without any motive of desires or lust, since, No hand of man, mal-efactors, led insinuations or lies thereof, without any motive, finally, as humans you will break the chains of slavery and hold the reins to the love of Christ's holy bonds.

We know, that the sons, in tears, we say, the things that surround us on every side, the dangers, we know that everywhere it is the consensus and opinion of the wicked, that lies in religion, the more it is gaining strength of character, and the things that are on the day of the disaster.

But do not be afraid, little flock, for whom He has redeemed with His blood, Jesus. I see that you are well-trained, where they help, to seek where lies each of the major dangers, safely and confidently remain silent.

So, having heard eagerly, to fly to where it comes from is all the hope of life, to Mary, to wit, that of the tower from which hang a thousand bucklers, and all the armor of the mighty men who thence brought arms as shields. Take and eat, not of this world such things as the moth might damage, nor take of things that rust spoils, and the enemy breaks into pieces, and fire consumes, but take of the spirit with which they can actively fight the battles of the victory that overcomes the world, successfully won.

And, we wrote that they never cease to make assiduous prayer, requesting of all good liberal God that wins the Virgin Mother, Queen, Duke and supporters of saving resources that you started, is realizing that one is always of the faith you are guarding and of one's religious activities.

We send to you [as a return gift] some hallowed offerings. Precious crowns, crosses, medals, images of saints, wax lambs, celestial images, free indulgences and radiance to be increased by as much protection as to evoke divine pity aimed at promoting and stimulating, but this is also a monument to our special services that will manifest notice.

Especially the help of the supplicants that he should suggest to all a successful and happy encounter with the heavenly, by which the developing countries in the universe ascend by steps, in the day of the city, adjusting to of the power of God in your hearts. We lovingly impart the Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of prosperity that is so great on you, beloved sons, to your countrymen, I extend to all of you.

Given at St. Peter's on May 1st One thousand eight hundred, during our second year.

## Discussion

The production of wampum belts by Indigenous communities to send to the seats of religious orders in Europe has a long history. The late André Sanfaçon specialized in the study of ecclesiastic wampum belts (see Sanfaçon 1996), but his massive compilation of data remains unpublished. A band of wampum fashioned by the Wendat (Huron) in 1678, and another sent by the Abenaki in 1699, remain the best known of the many ecclesiastic belts identified by Sanfaçon. Both of these belts remain in the treasury of Chartres Cathedral. Lainey (2004: 66, note 164) points out that the Wendat belt at Chartres “was made by the Wendat under the recommendations of Father Chaumonot ‘*pour allumer de plus en plus le feu du divin amour ... je leur fis faire un collier du porcelaine*’ [to ignite ever stronger, the fire of divine love ... I had them make a band of wampum]” (also personal communication, March 7, 2020). This suggests that the creation of the belt enhanced their love of God, while its prestation called upon the recipient to keep the faith. The imagery of lighting a (council) fire was a traditional Iroquoian call to listen to and share information.

Of interest is that the histories of the study of these two Chartres examples parallel that of the Vatican 1831 belt, including “re-discoveries” of their presence in France (Farabee 1922) and the publication of contemporary letters discussing their origins (Doublet de Boisthibault 1857; also Merlet 1858; for the letters see *De la Devotion des Sauvages de Canada, Envers la Sainte Vierge Honorée en l'Eglise de Chartres*, published in 1700).

Collectively these examples in France and Italy attest to efforts on the part of missionaries in Canada to link their parishioners with the mission sponsors in Europe that wished to generate changes in the religious beliefs of Indigenous people. The element linking them is a purely Indigenous custom: the prestation of a material object, such as a diplomatic wampum belt representing an honorific relationship, for example given at a treaty to verify a pledge. While the link between the promise and the object materializing the action is on what might be called a spiritual level, it is not a religious activity.

The efforts of the missionaries at the Lake of the Two Mountains to create a Christian religious bond among diverse Indigenous groups by means of this significant collective effort to create a wampum gift fell far short of anything they might have desired. The nearly 10,000 beads collected over an unknown period from the members of these two communities were woven into a belt of significant size and impressive design. The wampum beads in this two-meter long belt had a cash value in excess of US\$25 (see Becker 1980), a significant sum at the time, especially for a small Indigenous population in the 1830s (see Becker 2002, 2006). The return gift from Pope Gregory XVI to the priests and the ecclesiastical leaders of the mission included an impressive assortment of objects, but the extent to which this exchange aided in the integration of these Indigenous communities remains unknown. The early 1830s saw considerable efforts by Indigenous groups to expand or defend their respective large hunting territories that provided the basis for emerging Indigenous economies. The pelt trade had become essential to providing First Nations with access to textiles and other goods that were available only through long distance trade.

At least one Algonquin community now living in the interior traces its origins back to the period around 1830 at the Lake. Among contemporary elders at Maniwaki (Land of Mary), oral tradition explains that in the middle of the 1800s their ancestors relocated their summer activities from the area of the Lake of the Two Mountains (P. Culliford, personal communication, March 2020; see also Becker 2016). The Anishinabeg band of Algonquin now living on the Algonquin reserve known as Kitigan Zibi, recall that their ancestors brought with them a collection of

wampum that included four belts and a “hand” of wampum (several strings bound together). During a period from about 1930 to 1950 a few photographs of these items were published, and the return of some to Maniwaki was documented by Einhorn (1974; see also Becker 2016, 2020). This interesting group includes one belt with a cross and three human figures, a far more simple design than on the Vatican 1831 belt. The cross almost certainly identifies the Maniwaki example as an ecclesiastical belt, probably received from another Indigenous community affiliated with the Catholic Church.

## Conclusions

The importance of documenting the specific origins of any surviving wampum belt, a task almost never completely achieved in the various efforts on record, relates to modern quests for repatriation and cultural reclamation. Without careful research, however, misattribution can happen. Perhaps the most problematic return of wampum involved eleven belts once held by a collector named Roddy and later curated at the Smithsonian Institution. These examples were claimed as “League belts” by a group in the Six Nations Confederacy on Grand River, Canada. After Smithsonian representatives repatriated these examples to the Onondaga at the Six Nations Confederacy, Elisabeth Tooker, a noted scholar of Iroquoian cultures (see 1964), published a study tracing these eleven belts back to sources not related to the Grand River groups (1998). As Tooker points out, recent meanings attributed to these wampum belts by people at the Six Nations Reserve differ vastly from those statements offered by elders around 1900 (see also Carl Benn, personal communication, April 27, 2020). Claims to ownership of various wampum belts are multiple and conflicting, and are largely kept hidden from American and Canadian publics. But petitions and claims to ownership have become part of accelerating tensions involving rights to museum artifacts that once had been held, and sometimes made by, Indigenous groups or individuals.<sup>2</sup>

The Vatican 1831 wampum belt that I had suspected to have been a Mohawk creation is now definitely recognized as the product of the

Algonquin and Nipissing at the Lake of the Two Mountains. The specific individuals who fashioned this example are not yet identified, but details may be available in the Sulpician archives. What effect the return gifts from the pope had on the religious lives of Indigenous communities remains speculative and requires further research. From an Indigenous point of view, we know very

little about the significance of these objects in forming identities and shaping belief systems. The letters from the Algonquin and Nipissing at the Lake in 1831 that are reviewed here reveal the autonomy and independence of these First Nations at that time, and their abilities to form global political and ecclesiastical connections by using objects as powerful mediators.

## Notes

Sincere thanks are due to Jonathan Lainey (McCord-Stewart Museum) for identifying, locating, and sharing with me a copy of L'Abbé J. A. Cuoq's publication of the letters relating to the prestation of the Vatican 1831 wampum belt and the papal reply that includes a note of the pope's return gift. His kindness in reading earlier drafts of this paper are very much appreciated. Special thanks to Sharon L. Carlisle (Radcliffe College) for her translation of the French text and for extensive editorial work with the present version of this manuscript, and to Prof. Carl Benn for his kind reading of a draft of this paper and many useful suggestions. Thanks also to curator Don Roberto Zagnoli and to Ester Console of the Vatican Museums for their aid with research materials in their collections, including the Vatican 1831 wampum belt. At West Chester University, Dean Radha Pyati (College of the Sciences and Mathematics), Mary Page (Dean of University Libraries), and Prof. Heather Wholey (Chair, Anthropology) graciously provided their encouragement in all aspects of this research. The entire library staff at West Chester University aided in this project, and M. E. Gillon, Michael Jordan, Steven Marvin, Michael Ogoe helped with special searches. Finally, my sincere thanks are due to the two extremely gracious anonymous reviewers of this essay and to the *Material Culture Review* editorial staff for their contributions. Any errors in the presentation or the interpretation of these data are my own.

1. Some diary records exist regarding wampum bands being woven from loose beads by colonists en route to treaties (cf. Becker 2008). Many more documents refer to Indigenous people, usually locals but not always, being commissioned by colonists to fashion belts for presentation at conferences (treaties) to First

Nations representatives. Most likely those belts of larger size with more complex designs were made in advance. Diplomatic belts invariably are composed entirely of true wampum, with one or a few glass beads sometimes appearing by accident. Straps composed entirely of glass beads are ornamental, as are bands of wampum that incorporate beads of glass and/or copper. These "foreign" elements generally mark a band as ornamental. The appearance of small, round, off-white glass beads among the "letters" on the 1670s Wendat belt now at Chartres Cathedral suggest to me that this band was not woven by Indigenous people. Indigenous makers would have known that the presence of glass beads violated a basic cultural rule regarding the fabrication of diplomatic wampum bands (Becker 2012b). I suggest that Ursuline sisters affiliated with the mission that sent this band to France actually wove this belt. The use of glass "pony" beads in forming the letters "refined" (a term suggested by Jonathan Lainey) the script. I suggest that this process of smoothing the curvature of the letters is itself not in keeping with Indigenous tradition in the weaving of wampum bands.

2. As far as can be determined, surviving belts may all have been made by Europeans for presentation to Indigenous people. Those made by Indigenous people and presented to Europeans in exchange for belts received appear to have disappeared into colonial treasuries, with most or perhaps all being dismantled to fashion new belts. The quest to locate political belts that were received by colonials has not produced a single example (although there is some interesting data on pre-banking methods of what later became treasuries). Indigenous-made belts given to individuals (such as Edward Jenner, the discoverer of the smallpox vaccination) may be located in European collections.

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